

citizenship for the citizens of its member states. As such, Europeans have rights and obligations in relationship to each other that are not shared by the residents of third countries. They contribute to common funds, accept the movement of persons, goods and services from each other, accept regulations jointly made with each other. In return they receive help with infrastructure projects, can live and work in each other's countries easily, and enjoy

various opportunities for jointly funded cultural and scientific activities. It is a unique cross-national community, providing a rich structure of networks that help bridge that gap between the nations from which we come and the global humanity to which we aspire to contribute. For researchers and scholars the richness and unique quality are particularly clear. Once Brexit comes, we in Britain will be outside it. Nothing will replace it. ■

Interdisciplinary collaborative research in British universities post-Brexit

Simon Goldhill argues that the links with European research institutions and funding must be maintained



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When I speak in America and elsewhere about the benefits of interdisciplinary collaborative work in the humanities and social sciences, it gives me a certain frisson when I declare that Europe is currently at least 20 years ahead in research in this area. The reason for this has been, simply enough, the funding models put in place over recent decades.

The first example I give is from personal experience, a project that I have been running for the last five years, which is called 'The Bible and Antiquity in Nineteenth-Century Culture'. My team has been investigating the two most important paradigms of the past for Victorian society and how they interrelate in 19th-century thinking: namely the past of classical antiquity, and the past of the

biblical tradition. One icon of such thinking is Matthew Arnold's celebrated and hugely influential opposition of Hebraism and Hellenism as ways of understanding contemporary culture. But the interconnections of Greece and Rome and the Bible go deeply into almost all aspects of Victorian cultural analysis and self-understanding. And it is a regrettable irony of modern disciplinary formation that these two areas of scholarly understanding are the fields where most modern scholars of Victorian culture are least well trained, both in familiarity with Greek, Latin or the literature and history of antiquity, and in familiarity with biblical narratives and, as importantly, the theological arguments that underpin their understanding.

The project has five professors working on it, but has also been able to hire six postdoctoral fellows each for five years. The team includes art historians, classical scholars, historians, theologians, literary scholars, philologists. The work is integrally interdisciplinary, and

the questions it seeks to answer could be broached only by such a collaborative, multi-trained and multi-skilled team. It is simply inconceivable that any American institution, for example, would currently consider investing \$2.5 million – the cost of this project – in any such enterprise. It should be noted too that, although it would be easy enough (because correct) to argue that our inability to understand this Victorian historicism grounds our own deeply self-serving misrecognitions of how we fit into history (our own sense of modernity), this project is nonetheless research without a directed instrumental agenda.

When I talk about this, I can see my audience obviously and incredulously calculating the gulf between their models of research, which often privilege competition for short-term leave for individual academics to sit on their own in a room and write, and the long-term major investment in a project where collaboration and interdisciplinarity are a structural part of its working practice. Such financial opportunities empower scholars in Europe to undertake work of a reach and, we hope, significance denied to the lone scholar.

Of course it is necessary to recognise that lone scholars will always have their place and importance, and support for them will remain a pressing need. But there is considerable value, it seems to me, in *celebrating* what has been achieved in a moderately short time in Europe. The European Research Council (ERC), followed by the research councils in the United Kingdom (and in many other countries in Europe), have learned from laboratory models in the sciences, and have developed funding models for the humanities that encourage such big thinking. ‘The Bible and Antiquity’ was funded by an ERC Advanced Grant, and without such a grant scheme the project would not have been conceptualised as it was, and would not have been achievable in the way it was.

The benefits to British universities

In the last 15 years, British universities have been the most successful in capturing such European grants, somewhat to the chagrin of some of our European friends. But if you look at the passports of the principal investigators of such grants, especially at the Starter and Consolidator levels, a different picture emerges. Then the grants are more evenly distributed between nationalities. That is, many French, German, Italian, Spanish scholars are coming to Britain to undertake their research projects in British universities. Again, the prime cause for this is readily available. The infrastructure of British universities, and its research environment, carefully if bumpily tended over the last decades, outstrips many European institutional frameworks to such a degree that younger scholars are encouraged to come here for significant periods. When I first came to Cambridge as a young

academic, there were only one or two fellows in my college who were not British; now at least 50 per cent of the academic staff is international. Many university departments and research units reflect similar shifts in demographics. At the same time, many projects in European universities partner British universities, and are happy to host our academics in shared endeavours in their own institutions. Universities are international organisations that attract the best scholars they can. It is not by chance that graphene, the so-called ‘miracle’ material, was first discovered and developed by a team led by a Russian scientist working at Manchester on an ERC grant. When I say ‘not by chance’, I mean precisely that we should celebrate a triumph of international research funded by a European organisation in a major British university.

The role of the university

The relation between a university and the state has been changing. There can be little doubt that university education and university research are crucial drivers of economic success in any modern nation state. And while there has been a long and chequered history – sometimes a shameful one – of demanding a close link

between the ideology and self-assertion of a particular state and the education and research of its universities and schools, consistently – since the Second World War – the movement of scholars, teachers and students and, as importantly, the movement of ideas have been breaking down any over-simplified, deterministic connection between national culture and a university’s work.

This leaves us with a pressing and insistent question about the role of a university within the nation state. The most dangerous response (because most politically naive) is to assume that, as society continues to change, there are easy or self-evident answers to the apparently simple questions: Who should the university educate and how? What should its research priorities be? There is a precarious tension between the growing internationalisation of universities and the growing nationalism of some dominant versions of political rhetoric across Britain and Europe.

The threats to British universities

One potential result of Britain removing itself from the European Union could be the violent disruption of the trajectories I have been outlining. It is possible to conceive that the British government will both prevent British universities from applying for ERC and other European grants, and hinder the easy movement of academics between universities in Britain and Europe. As our colleagues in Europe have frequently pointed out in head-shaking bafflement, this act of self-destruction seems impossible to justify on financial or intellectual grounds.

Universities are international organisations that attract the best scholars they can

We should indeed be clear what such a change will entail. There will be a gradual – not instant – diminution of Britain’s leading role in academic research. The loss of finance (and it would be very unwise to assume that the government will make available the money no longer coming from Europe) will affect the infrastructure and research environment as much as it will prevent the actual projects taking place. The increasing separation from European projects will also diminish Britain’s research potential. It will become much harder to maintain the hard-won barrier between university research agendas and government policy for research, as multiple sources for research funding become centralised and structured by an aggressive and short-term instrumentality.

Arguing the case

Yet it is still possible – I am always a cup-half-full person – to strive to find a route through the threat. We need to make the case, with as much energy and drive as we can muster, to maintain our ability to apply for European funding, both on the inevitably necessary financial grounds, and on the harder but more satisfying intellectual grounds of what it enables us to do, and how important it is for us to do it. It is crucial for the long-term success of the universities in Britain, and all that follows from such success.

For us to be able to apply for such grants, the movement of academics is crucial. It is clear that

the movement of students has already become a serious and explicit political issue. No doubt this is being worked on through all the usual channels to find a solution that recognises that foreign students are not migrant workers or immigrants, but are important factors in forming and maintaining our long-term financial and political relations with other countries. But also, to head off increasingly difficult conditions for academics visiting Britain, we need to be pro-active in ensuring that the movement of academics can be made easy in practice and politically acceptable to our European colleagues as well as our own government.

We should eagerly strive to maintain our integrated ties with European research institutions and with European research funding and its models for collaborative interdisciplinary research. We should do so not because of any conservative resistance to change, but because of a passionate desire to continue the trajectory of change the modern university is on, in response to changing political circumstances and changing needs and opportunities. How a university is to relate to society is a question too complex and too important to be left to the vagaries of the sort of political posturing which have so distorted the public debates about Brexit. It is good to see the British Academy arguing in public and in private, strongly and coherently, for why our research ties with Europe matter so much. ■